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Apostles and Apostleship

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Jesus, during His earthly ministry, called twelve disciples to follow Him and represent Him as His specially designated apostles. These apostles became the primary leaders in the early church and in the spread of the gospel beyond the borders of Palestine. But were these twelve the only apostles? Are there apostles today? A clear understanding of New Testament apostleship will help us to better grasp the nature of God's plan for the church and the spread of the gospel today.

Greek Terms for "Apostle"

The noun *apostolos* (sent one), and its verb form *apostello* (to send), occur frequently in the New Testament. The verb most often expresses a general sense of sending, usually with the authority of the sender. The noun, however, usually has a more technical connotation. It refers to someone sent with authority. It is the Greek noun *apostolos* (apostle), and the related noun *apostole* (apostleship), that provide the basis for our understanding of the office of an apostle in the New Testament.

The word *apostolos* is rare outside the New Testament, but "it occurs seventy-nine times in the NT,"¹ making it a rather distinctively Christian term. *Apostolos* occurs only once in Matthew (10:2), once in Mark (6:30), although it also appears in Mark 3:14 in

some manuscripts), and once in John (13:16). It is found eight times in the General Epistles and Revelation. *Apostolos* is most frequently found in the writings of Luke and Paul, and was especially applicable to the early church and the spread of the gospel through the church's specially designated apostles. However, Christian apostleship clearly began when Jesus appointed twelve of His disciples as apostles.

The Twelve Apostles

According to the clear statement in Matthew 10:1-2, Jesus' apostles were none other than the twelve disciples. Luke 6:13 states that Jesus selected twelve of His disciples "whom he also designated apostles." The parallel account in Mark 3:14 indicates that Jesus intended that these twelve apostles would "be with him" and that He would "send them out to preach." When Jesus did send the twelve apostles out on their mission, He granted them special, miraculous powers (Matthew 10:1-4; Mark 6:7-13, 30; Luke 9:1-6, 10). No other individuals are designated "apostles" in the Gospels. Revelation 21:14 also affirms that there were twelve apostles.

Special Apostles

Although the Gospels refer only to the twelve disciples as apostles, there are at least two other individuals to whom the New Testament clearly applies this title. After Judas' betrayal and death, the twelve apostles were reduced in number to eleven. Acts 1:24-26 describes how Peter led in identifying Matthias to take Judas' place of "apostleship." Matthias was "added to the eleven apostles."

Later, in a unique way Jesus appeared to Paul along the road to Damascus and appointed him as an apostle. Paul saw his apostolic calling as equal to that of the twelve apostles but distinct in that his calling came later and under unusual circumstances (1 Corinthians 15:7-8; Galatians 1:17). He frequently referred to his apostleship as his basis for spiritual authority (see, for example, the opening verse of Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus), and at times he even had to defend his apostolic position (1 Corinthians 9:1-2; 2 Corinthians 12:11-12).

In addition to the twelve apostles and Paul, Barnabas may have been called by the Lord into apostleship. Acts 14:14 refers to

Barnabas as an apostle alongside Paul (compare verse 4). Furthermore, Paul seems to include Barnabas along with himself in defending the apostolic calling (1 Corinthians 9:6). However, Barnabas' apostleship is not beyond question. Acts 9:27 refers to him as distinct from the apostles, not a member of the apostolic band. Furthermore, we must remember that the term "apostle" at times may refer to church workers in general or to those sent by a specific church rather than those sent authoritatively by Jesus Christ. Second Corinthians 8:23 refers to apostles, or representatives, of the churches. Epaphroditus seems to have been such an apostle, or messenger (Philippians 2:25). Barnabas may have been merely an apostle, or messenger, of the church at Antioch. Nowhere is he called an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Beyond the twelve apostles, the apostle Paul, and the possible apostleship of Barnabas, some scholars consider the apostolate to be even more expansive. J. B. Lightfoot says:

And as a matter of fact we do not find the term Apostle restricted to the Twelve with only the exception of St Paul. St Paul himself seems in one passage to distinguish between "the Twelve" and "all the Apostles," as if the latter were the more comprehensive term (1 Cor. xv. 5, 7). It appears both there and in other places that James the Lord's brother is styled an Apostle. On the most natural interpretation of a passage in the Epistle to the Romans, Andronicus and Junias, two Christians otherwise unknown to us, are called distinguished members of the apostolate, language which indirectly implies a very considerable extension of the term. In 1 Thess. ii.6 again, where in reference to his visit to Thessalonica he speaks of the disinterested labours of himself and his colleagues, adding "though *we* might have been burthensome to you, being *Apostles* of Christ," it is probable that under this term he includes Silvanus, who had laboured with him in Thessalonica and whose name appears in the superscription of the letter."²

However, 1 Corinthians 15:7 and Galatians 1:19 seem to make a distinction between James and the apostles rather than identify him with the apostolic band, though the first reference may indeed hint at

an expanded body of apostles. The reference to Andronicus and Junias as apostles in Romans 16:7 is more convincing, although we must bear in mind that "occasionally the word is used somewhat broadly to include leaders in Christian work (cf. 1 Thess. 2:7)."³ Andronicas and Junias, along with Silas, may fit into this category.

Qualifications of Apostleship

What did it take to be called as an apostle? Jesus indicated that the original apostles were to be "with" Him in His earthly ministry (Mark 3:14). Matthias was chosen to replace Judas because he had been "with" Jesus and the other apostles throughout Jesus' ministry (Acts 1:21-22). Paul based his apostleship on a personal encounter with Jesus (1 Corinthians 9:1-2). The twelve apostles were granted power to work miracles (Matthew 10:1), as was Paul (2 Corinthians 12:12). Because being "with" Jesus was a qualification for apostleship, it seems best to understand that there can be no true apostles of Jesus Christ today. The apostolic office "ceased, as a matter of course, with its first holders, all continuation of it, from the very conditions of its existence (comp. I Cor. 9:1), being impossible."⁴ While there may still be apostles in the general sense of the term—church representatives or missionaries—the apostles of Jesus Christ were limited in number and existed only in the initial stage of the work of the church.

¹ Kruse, Colin G. "Apostle" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall, eds.). Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992, p. 27.

² Lightfoot, J. B. *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1902, pp. 95-96.

³ Harrison, Everett F. "Romans" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 10. Frank E. Gaebel, editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976, p. 164.

⁴ Unger, Merrill F. *Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, p. 73.